

Girls Leading Outward[♀]



students are running this fund-raising event, which demonstrates what a group of middle school girls can do when they are given a voice and empowered to lead.

At the start of the academic year, these 16 ethnically diverse girls were considered “at-risk,” and school staff members were worried about their upcoming transition to high school. Some of the students had experienced behavior difficulties throughout middle school; others were struggling academically or socially. In short, these girls were slowly drowning in a sea of other students. Lessons from research (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2002; Elias, 2010; Klein, 2008) suggested that giving them a negative label and providing remediation would not help them learn to swim on their own. They needed a program that would build their confidence, competence, and character.

Meeting Special Challenges

Most students face challenges as they make the transition from middle school to high school. But for many of the girls at Red Bank Middle School, these challenges were amplified.

Red Bank Borough Public School District is a small, suburban, K–8 school district in eastern New Jersey. In 2007, 31 percent of the students were black, and 51 percent were Latino; 9 percent were eligible to receive free lunch. After middle school, Red Bank students go on to a regional high school where the percentages of black and Latino students are about 15 and 16 percent, respectively. Research has shown that the high school transition is usually more difficult for black and Latino students

By shining a light on the leadership qualities of at-risk students, this program prepares them for high school success.

Heather Hamed, Jazmin Reyes, Dominic C. Mocerri, Laura Morana, and Maurice J. Elias

The gym at Red Bank Middle School is buzzing. There are beautiful decorations, face painting, arts and crafts, and more. Shalonda is teaching younger students

how to hula hoop. Annie gets on the loudspeaker to thank the principal and teachers for their support. Maria is encouraging students to donate more money to help the people of Haiti. Anyone looking around can see that

when they experience a sharp decline in the numerical representation of their ethnic group (Benner & Graham, 2009). In addition, minority girls—particularly Latinas—are statistically more likely to become disengaged and drop out of school (Garcia-Reid, 2007).

To better prepare its female minority students for the challenges they would face in high school, Red Bank Middle School teamed up with the Developing Safe and Civil Schools Project at Rutgers University to implement a program called GLO (Girls Leading Outward). Middle school teachers and the Rutgers team worked together to identify 7th and 8th grade girls who would benefit from the program. The invitation to join the program emphasized the girls' strengths and leadership potential. Trained Rutgers University students facilitated two groups, one for 7th graders and one for 8th graders, under the supervision of the middle school counselor. Both groups attended one-hour after-school GLO sessions during the 2009–10 school year; the 8th graders attended 25 sessions, and the 7th graders attended 27 sessions.

How GLO Works

Skills Training

The GLO program is built on the equation *Mind + Voice + Heart + Team = Leadership*. To be a leader, a student must have mind (the ability to think through problems and come up with solutions); voice (the ability to speak out confidently); heart (passion as well as the ability to recognize and cope with emotions); and skills in functioning within a team. The program teaches girls problem-solving skills, emotional recognition and regulation skills, communication and assertiveness skills, and teamwork skills to build community among the group.

Each week, the group focuses on a different leadership skill associated with one part of the GLO equation. Students reflect on how the skill is relevant to them and how they have used it in

the past. Each session finishes with a physical activity to enable the girls to have fun with the skill and further build group spirit.

To reinforce learning, most skills are associated with an acronym. During a session focused on *voice*, students learned the acronym BEST (Body posture, Eye contact, Speech, and Tone) to help them practice assertive communication. Amalie felt that this acronym really captured what she needed to do to get adults to listen to her. She reminded herself to use BEST when speaking out in the GLO sessions and

GLO is based on the idea that every girl has leadership potential.

used it to help other girls in the group communicate. Amalie practiced using BEST before asking a teacher to assist in the pie-in-the-face game at the fund-raising event. She was thrilled when the teacher listened to her, took her seriously, and agreed to participate. For the first time, Amalie felt listened to. This interaction impressed the teacher, who had often had negative interactions with Amalie.

During one of the *heart* sessions, Malia was intrigued by the connections among emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. She described a time when she got in a fight with a woman driving a car in the school parking lot. She was in a bad mood, and when the driver came a bit too close to her, Malia assumed that the driver meant to run her over. As Malia rethought the exchange with this woman, she realized that if she hadn't already been feeling angry, she may not have assumed the woman intended to run her over. The idea that her own emotions and thoughts were responsible for her aggressive behavior was a revelation for Malia.

Leadership Project

Another equation used in the GLO approach is *Leadership + Community Outreach = Empowerment*. Students become empowered when they display leadership, get involved with the community through service, receive positive recognition, and reflect on how their actions led to positive results. Therefore, GLO students engage in a leadership project that improves the lives of others in the community. The students design and control the project, while trained facilitators provide structure.

At Red Bank Middle School, the GLO

girls decided to raise money to assist the people of Haiti. The girls were in control from start to finish. They decided to host a fund-raising event at the school that featured kid-friendly activities to encourage students to donate.

The process of advertising for the fund-raising event and holding the event created many opportunities for the girls to present themselves positively to others. They made announcements about the event, sold tickets at lunch, worked out logistics with the maintenance staff and teachers, and interacted with administrators as they obtained necessary permissions. The GLO girls not only raised money for Haiti, but also became empowered as they saw the fantastic results of their team effort.

As a result of the fund-raiser and all that led up to it, these girls became highly visible in the school. They interacted with other students and staff in ways hard to imagine previously. They found a purpose that had eluded them in their past school experiences. Teachers were impressed to see these students engaged so actively in a positive cause.

A Strength-Based Approach

In the GLO program, we repeatedly remind students of their leadership potential instead of reprimanding them for their weaknesses. For example, Carolyn was in a bad mood because she had gotten in trouble during the class before GLO. As a result, she did not want to join the rest of the group sitting in a circle on the floor. One of the facilitators went over to Carolyn and explained that the group needed her input and would not be the same without her; when she was ready, everyone would be happy for her to join them. Within minutes, Carolyn had joined the circle. This positive, strength-based approach was different from other interactions that Carolyn had experienced with authority figures.

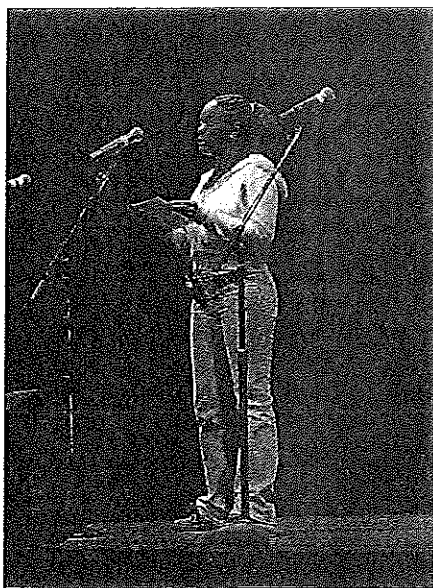
GLO Stories

A staff member told us she had not even known that Jessica, one of the 7th grade GLO girls, attended the school. But once Jessica joined GLO, the staff member saw her handing out fliers and talking with other students. She said that whenever she saw Jessica walking out of the classroom after the GLO program, "Her face was glowing!"

Jessica is not alone. Lela, a member of the 8th grade GLO girls, hardly ever spoke. She was an outcast in the school who was often teased. Lela often struggled with emotional control and assertiveness. The group was surprised when she volunteered to ask the principal for permission to hold the GLO fund-raising event in the school gym. All the girls were a bit intimidated by this task as they reflected on previous negative interactions with the principal. Lela politely got the principal's attention and spoke clearly and confidently as she explained her cause. The principal could not have been more pleased.

Eighth grade GLO member Natalie had habitually used aggression to relate to people. At first, no one in the group wanted to interact with her. During the first two sessions of GLO, her partici-

pation consisted of negative remarks. Fortunately, GLO helped her feel more comfortable. We paired Natalie with other members who would be positive influences during activities, and we recognized and reinforced any positive statements she made. By the third session, Natalie was part of the group.



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She gradually built friendships with many other members, and the group came to rely on her artistic talent in making posters to advertise the fund-raising event.

The Leaders They Really Are

The transition to high school is difficult for many students, but especially for those who have adjustment problems in middle school. To address this problem, GLO brings together emerging findings on student voice, empowerment, leadership, and service to create a

strong, positive alternative approach to dealing with youth who are at risk. Results from 2009–10 suggest that GLO increased the girls' overall self-concept and, particularly among the more introverted and shy girls in the groups, their sense of mastery.

GLO is based on the idea that every girl has leadership potential; sometimes it just takes extra support to bring it out. As one of the GLO facilitators likes to say, "GLO empowers girls to be the leaders they really are." ■

Authors' note: Students' names are pseudonyms.

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Heather Hamed (heather.hamed@gmail.com) is a doctoral student in the Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey. **Jazmin Reyes** (reyesja@eden.rutgers.edu), and **Dominic C. Moceri** (dmoceri@eden.rutgers.edu) are doctoral students in the Psychology Department of Rutgers University. **Laura Morana** (moranal@rbk.k12.nj.us) is superintendent of Red Bank Borough Public Schools, Red Bank, New Jersey. **Maurice J. Elias** (rutgersmje@aol.com) is a professor in the Department of Psychology and director of the Social and Emotional Learning Laboratory at Rutgers University.

